The role of the implicit in the writer-reader evaluative dialogue

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As we delve more and more deeply into the topic of evaluation (i.e., Hunston & Thompson 2000), one further aspect we might consider is how evaluation, as an organized and structured social activity, exists both as an ongoing process for reconfirming and maintaining communal values and as a complex dialogical interaction between writer and reader(s).

In this process, a text’s various readers, such as the reviewers, editors, or journal readers of a research article, evaluate a particular author’s claims, propositions and interpretations against the backdrop of disciplinary practices and beliefs. As noted by Hunston & Thompson (2000, p. 13), the process of evaluation “…consists of anything which is compared to or contrasts with the norm.” Therefore, in addition to a bed of knowledge, suppositions, beliefs and values, it can be surmised that members of a discourse community also share a tacit consensus over what needs to be evaluated and how, so as to preserve and maintain current norms of belief, value and practice within the community. Through the evaluative process, members of a community look for and contrast claims, propositions or actions with those currently promoted by the community. The process of evaluation allows the community to maintain values, by weeding out anomalies, encouraging standards and binding individuals to a collective value system. The way in which texts show traces of this evaluative process constitutes one of the most frequently studied aspects of the evaluative process.

However, we might also consider another part of the evaluative process, where evaluation can be viewed as an ongoing dialogue, occurring at different points in time. The dialogical nature of evaluation points also to the role played by the writer of a prior text, whose claims and propositions then become the object of evaluation in a later text. It is obvious that when someone sets out to construct a text, whose claims, etc., are to be evaluated by a community of readers, it is every writer’s desire that the future evaluative process should succeed; it can also be assumed that he or she will endeavor fully to make this happen. Therefore, another element of the writer-reader evaluative dialogue that we might investigate is what a writer might say so as to provide the best, solid evidence for a positive and successful evaluation. To do this, the writer will state what can be said as clearly as possible, carefully choosing words and ordering arguments for the best intended effect. But, given the conventions of some modern academic discourses, where drawing attention to one’s self has become taboo and authorial modesty has become the norm (Salager-Meyer 1998, Swales 1998, Dressen 2002), it might rather be the case that many of the resources available to the author for initiating the evaluative dialogue, and for providing elements leading to a positive evaluation, are in fact implicit.

The fundamental role played by “silences” in communication has been strongly underscored by a number of authors over the years (Ducrot 1972, Hall 1985, Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985, Jaworski 1993, Becker 1995), although attention to silences in written discourse analysis has been relatively scant (Huckin 2002, Dressen 2002). Nonetheless, we can observe that silence is not a simple pause or absence of communication, but rather like overt, explicit discourse, it has a functional role with its own meaning and interpretive value. This interpretive value is not immediately apparent, for it is implicit and appears only after the reader has “reconstructed” the writer’s intent on the basis of shared knowledge and assumptions. Over time, such silences become a normalized and anticipatable part of the institutional framework that regulates many written communicative interactions. It is suggested here that the evaluative dialogue in some academic discourses may in fact be initiated by a set of linguistic devices that embody implicit cues, whereby writers signal to their readers the basis — or evidence — by which they wish to be evaluated.

This paper will describe a set of such implicit devices within one relatively unfamiliar discipline, geology, where writers seek to establish their credibility, authority and competence before their peers through an account of their fieldwork. One historically important aspect of the normalizing evaluative process in geology is to determine which field geologists do — and which do not — show field competence, and thus, can be considered credible and especially, authoritative, by the community. Part of the evaluation of field geologists’ competence occurs within the frame offered by one particular written part-genre, the Field Account, where researchers give results of their fieldwork in the research article. How the writer works to establish positive evaluative evidence using overwhelmingly implicit means will be the focus of this presentation.
While the primary tasks of describing and interpreting the field are something one might teach to geology students on their way into the discipline, it is clear that for senior and more experienced researchers, the rhetorical construction of the Field Account also depends on the presentation of field data in a way which anticipates how readers may react. The success of a Field Account would therefore appear to be contingent upon the writer taking up a number of discipline-internal issues by strategically manipulating the features of the discourse occurring ‘below the surface’, so to speak. Here, one tangible role of the implicit is as a vehicle, which works to provide crucial information for persuading readers to positively evaluate the research under consideration.

One of the larger issues this study raises is how we might identify implicit elements of the evaluative dialogue, or even, other conventionalized silences. As argued here, part of the dialogical relationship linking readers and writers is established through discreet background cues. Importantly, in the Field Account, these implicit devices are seen to occur as a set of non-grammatically organized, subdiscoursal clusters of optional traces. An author strategically draws on a number of thematically functional traces in order to implicitly construct the cues that will influence the evaluative outcome of his or her claims and interpretations.

The structure and role of implicit propositions in institutional discourses, in turn, leads to another issue raised by the study, namely, how studying the occurrence of the implicit may add to our understanding of the structure of genre. Rather than considering that genre writers fulfill their intended goals through the completion of a series of stepped, progressive moves (e.g., Swales 1990), the identification of the set of implicit devices described here suggests that genre is perhaps better viewed as a “constellation” (Schryer 2000) of optional clusters of features. It is the ensemble of such trace clusters acting together that achieves the desired, rhetorical effect — such as for geologists, a positive evaluation of their field competence.

Citations

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